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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001806

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TAGS: MARR SENV KS

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND ENVIRONMENT MINISTER SPAR OVER  
REMEDIATION AT CLOSED U.S. BASES

REF: A. SEOUL 888

¶B. 05 SEOUL 4906

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ALEXANDER VERSHBOW, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Ambassador made an introductory call on Minister of Environment Lee Chi-beom on May 25. After initial pleasantries, the Ambassador highlighted strong U.S. frustration that continued disagreement over environmental remediation had stalled the return of closed bases. He noted that the United States had put forward a reasonable plan that went beyond the letter of our obligations under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). In response, Lee asserted that the Agreed Minutes of 2001 stipulate consultations on the level and method of remediation, and argued that it was important to find a solution that would be persuasive for Korean public opinion. Ambassador forcefully backed the proposal made by U.S. Forces Korea and warned against "making the better the enemy of the good." Both recognized that the issue would be discussed in greater depth during the 8th Strategic Policy Initiative (SPI) consultations scheduled for later in the day in Hawaii. End Summary.

COOPERATION ON FTA, AIR POLLUTION, CLEAN DEVELOPMENT

¶12. (U) Ambassador opened by recalling the long cooperation between the USG and the Ministry of Environment (MOE). He expressed appreciation for MOE's support during the March visit of the lead negotiator of the environment chapter of the proposed U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and for its help with follow-on questions submitted by USTR. He asked the Minister, who has been in office for only 6 weeks, about his priorities.

¶13. (U) Lee identified his priorities as improving public environmental health, for which a 10-year plan has been adopted, and creating a system of consensus-building to avoid social conflicts over environmental issues. He cited the Saemangeum land reclamation project (Ref A) and the nuclear waste repository siting issue (Ref B) as examples of the kind of societal conflicts over environmental concerns that he hopes to avoid in the future.

¶14. (U) Ambassador noted that the U.S. appreciates Korea's participation in the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate. Lee observed that Korea and the United States share common interests expressed in the

Partnership, and mentioned as well the bilateral cooperation between MOE and EPA in the Integrated Environmental Strategies project concerned with air pollution in the Seoul area. On the latter, Ambassador expressed the hope that the data generated by the project would prove helpful to Korean policymakers.

#### FRUSTRATION OVER ENVIRONMENTAL REMEDIATION ISSUE

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¶15. (C) A more contentious issue needed to be raised, the Ambassador said, because it was an important one for the U.S.-Korea alliance. U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) were very frustrated that disagreement over the issue of environmental remediation at closed bases was impeding the agreed realignment of U.S. forces and the return of valuable real estate to the Korea people. The United States had put forward a reasonable plan that went beyond our legal obligations under the SOFA. Ambassador expressed the hope that the new Minister would exert leadership to bring about a solution on the basis of the generous U.S. proposal.

¶16. (C) Minister Lee replied that this was among the most pressing issues he had faced in his six weeks in office. He was very conscious that Korea and the U.S. had cooperated not only on environmental issues but in the military alliance that had built friendly relations over more than 50 years. He therefore wanted a solution to the remediation issue that would be smooth, reasonable, and appropriate. He said he had studied the relevant agreements. He recalled that when USFK was first established, there were no environmental obligations or provisions. In 2001 an environmental provision was added (the Agreed Minutes), which stipulates consultations between the two allies on the level and method of remediation. He said that Korea was not asking for

perfect remediation, but that consultation was needed. There is a high degree of environmental awareness on the part of the Korean public, which has led to the social conflicts he had described earlier. If the two allies fail to find a solution that is persuasive to the Korean public, the public will blame both the Korean and U.S. governments in ways that could be detrimental to the alliance. We need to approach the issue with prudence, he argued, appealing for U.S. help in finding a solution the public would understand and accept.

¶17. (C) Ambassador replied that the United States fully understands the importance of public opinion in a democracy, but also that you can't satisfy all the people all the time. He recalled that in addition to the mandate for consultation, the SOFA contained a standard for remediation -- "known imminent substantial endangerment," or KISE. USFK forces and families had lived and worked in the closed installations for many years without endangering their health. The USFK proposal already goes well beyond the required standard, the Ambassador said, adding that asking for more is asking for too much.

¶18. (C) Minister Lee reiterated his view that the agreement under the SOFA made the issue of returning closed facilities subject to consultation. He indicated that the level and method of remediation should be jointly decided, and that a more protective standard than KISE should be chosen. Ambassador replied that USG lawyers would not agree with that stance. He said the U.S. proposal, known as the LaPorte proposal, includes pumping out groundwater contaminated by fuel and would be easy to support to the public as reasonable and effective.

¶19. (C) Lee interjected that, while General LaPorte had put forward an important proposal on January 30, a later communication from DUSD Lawless was a step backward, creating an "unfortunate inconsistency." Ambassador countered that DUSD Lawless had merely stated the LaPorte proposal in writing, and that the USG had never intended to assume an obligation beyond the steps outlined in the proposal. Lee argued that six months of bioslurping would not be adequate remediation because the soil is also contaminated and will

recontaminate the groundwater. The soil must also be treated, he asserted.

¶10. (C) Ambassador advised the Minister against "making the better the enemy of the good." The LaPorte proposal would make a big contribution to cleaning up the closed facilities.

He recalled that, in returning closed bases, the United States is not asking for any compensation for its investments in infrastructure, unlike the case in Germany. The Minister's position set an unreasonable benchmark, he said, one that the U.S. military would not be prepared to meet.

¶11. (C) Lee responded that he understood that in the German case, the expense of environmental remediation was subtracted from the compensation required, indicating that it should be clear that the responsibility for environmental remediation lay with the United States. He said that two countries as close as the United States and Korea should not negotiate the matter like merchants, and hoped that as a superpower the United States would be more generous.

¶12. (C) Ambassador replied that U.S. forces are in Korea to guarantee Korea's security, a commitment that reflects great American generosity. Both sides need to share the burden of the changes in the alliance, but the U.S. side in this case is being asked to assume too much of the burden. He alluded to the cost of maintaining security at closed facilities, and noted that time is running short for an agreed approach. The U.S. military has already started to implement the LaPorte proposal, he said. He warned that it could be damaging for the alliance if there is no agreement on the basis of the very reasonable U.S. proposal.

VERSHBOW